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## Vincent Pham Interview

Devin Meyer  
*DePaul University*

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Interviewer: Devin Meyer

Interviewee: Vincent Pham, Asian American Studies Doctoral Student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Site: Chicago, IL

Date: 5/24/09

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2009 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies*



DM: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, biography wise?

VP: Ok so I am twenty-eight years old. I grew up in the South Suburbs of Chicago in Hazel Crest, which is, I call it the buffer zone, right between Flossmoor and Harvey, so a working class suburb. My parents came here in 1975 after the fall of Saigon as part of the second wave of Vietnamese refugees. We were adopted by a family in the south suburbs of Chicago in collaboration with the Catholic church, which was part of the politics of the Vietnamese refugee movement at that time. The area that I grew up in didn't have any Asian-Americans or Asians

except for one other family which was actually my dad's best friend's from Vietnam. I don't know how they happened to be in the same place that we were. On my mom's side, all of her relatives were on the south side of Chicago, Beverly-Evergreen Park area. My dad's side was all up in the Raven's wood, Ashland, and Wilson area. The majority of them moved out to San Jose. My dad's sister stayed here but that was it. So I grew up spending most of my weekends and one of my extended family's places. I went to a Catholic grade school k-8<sup>th</sup> and a school out of district, illegally out of district, mainly because the high schools in my general area were not great. The Catholic school in my area was really good but at that time my dad had lost his job and I am the youngest out of five so they had to put a bunch of other kids through school, including college. I went to Alan B. Shepherd in the southwest suburbs and there weren't many Asian Americans. There were some Thai kids, but I did really well in school and ended up going to U of I down in Urbana-Champaign. I was thinking about going to Truman University in Missouri because it was cheap but after visiting I decided I didn't want to go to Truman so I decided to go to U of I just because it was a good school. I majored in biology because my sister did. She did well in it and I figured I was okay in it.

DM: Are you planning on doing anything with your degree in biology?

VP: No, my biology degree is done. I did as much as I could. I was planning on teaching high school, and then I ended up not doing that because I substitute taught in the high school I used to go to school at, but after doing it I decided that was not what I wanted to do. I decided to go back to graduate school for communication. I am now currently working on my doctorate in communication, specifically rhetoric and organizational communication with Asian-American Studies as kind of a specialty even though I don't have it officially on my transcript. One of my areas of expertise is Asian-American media representation.

DM: Are you planning on using your Asian-American Studies degree to do anything specific? How does that impact what you're planning on doing? You're planning on writing a book, correct?

VP: Yes, well I co-authored a book with my advisor already on Asian-Americans in the media. I will eventually have to write my own book on Asian-Americans. I guess to answer your question "how does Asian-American studies fit into what I want to do?" I would say for me it's more the other way around like "how will what I do contribute to Asian-American studies?" I guess that's just the way academics are taught to think about it. They ask "What are you bringing to the field of Asian-American studies that wasn't there before you?" So that's part of why you do research, so you can contribute to bodies of knowledge. Just like what you're doing now is contributing to knowledge about Asian and Asian-American artists in Chicago. I've read some of the old literature on Asian-American art and it was very different than what I understood as Asian-American art or than how I had experienced through the collective and things like that.

DM: My second question would be how do you identify yourself both in ethnicity and as an artist?

VP: Okay, here's the tricky thing which is why I find it kind of funny. I don't really consider myself an artist. My involvement with the collective is what gives me the ability to say I'm an

artist on some level because for that short period of time when I was involved with the Asian-American Arts Collective I was producing art on some level: performance, sketch, comedy plays. In my own particular way I would consider myself creative, but I wouldn't consider myself an artist in the sense that I'm continually producing work for other people to see in a creative vain like that. My work lately is dealing with academic, but since the Asian-American Artist community in Chicago is relatively small, at ones dealing with the collective, like once you're kind of in it they understand that even though I don't produce work I can be very supportive and contribute if I have something to give. For me to take up the label of "artist" comes with certain responsibilities that I don't have the ability, nor do I want to participate in having those responsibilities of being an artist. But ethnicity wise I would call myself Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American but I would identify racially as Asian-American which has a sociopolitical importance to it. In terms of being an artist, I would consider myself an Asian-American artist more so than a Vietnamese-American artist because when I used to do work it wasn't so much focused on my very localized experience of being Vietnamese-American, but my much broader experience of being Asian-American in relation to other people who are also Asian-American even though they might ethnically identify as specifically Vietnamese-American or Thai-American or whatever.

DM: Specifically about the book you're planning on writing, what made you choose to write the book on Asian-American media?

VP: Well it actually came a lot from my work with the Asian-American Artist Collective and some of the other stuff I'm interested in. I'm interested in how minority groups, specifically Asian Americans, engage in issues of media representation and in dealing with mainstream media and producing their own media that lets them create what it means to be Asian-American.

DM: So is it dealing with stereotypes within the media and the contrast between how media represents them and how they want to represent themselves?

VP: A little bit. It's a lot about what are Asian-Americans in response to those stereotypes. When Asian-Americans artists create art are they doing this in response or, on some level, are they meeting with the politics of representation. When media activists talk of networks, who are they trying to deal with? When film festivals occur, what are they communicating about being Asian-American in Asian-American film, an Asian-American actor? Why is Harold and Kumar such a huge movie when it's really just a stoner-buddy flick? Well, it's a movie that stars two Asian-American actors for the first time and he gets to kiss the girl at the end. So these are issues which people are taking up in terms of representation and also how they engage in specific ways. It's about representation but also creating representation.

DM: Do you want this book to send a certain message or do you see it impacting artists or the Asian-American community in any way?

VP: That's a good question because I don't know if I've ever thought about it. I think, on one level I would like it to impact them so that they can recognize that they have a power over the image environment around them, but also to recognize that even if they don't mean for it to be political it will inherently be political anyways just because of their identity. Even though I might

not do work that's specifically about Asian-Americans just the fact I'm Asian-American and also producing particular work sets off a particular image that I have no control over.

DM: Does that bother you?

VP: No, that's just how it is. I mean, I think it bothers me if you don't recognize that that itself has an ability and that you can control how people perceive you. So despite the fact that I would never argue that I don't want to be known as an Asian-American, I will always be seen as one, and this matters somewhat on some level. I can't necessarily control that fact that whenever anyone thinks of a professor they see an old white guy with a beard and teaches literature and when they think of engineers they're usually not English speaking, really smart, but can't communicate, and when I walk into a communications class and I look young and sometimes I look hip that I have no control over the fact that I'm communicating "Hey, there's a possibility for us to be that social." The sheer presence becomes a statement.

The book is a work in progress, and I would like to believe that it will help communicate to Asian-American artists and Asian-Americans in the media that their work always has some political aspect regardless of if they want it to. They have to recognize that it does on some level. Whether they vocalize its political nature is irrelevant to me as long as they realize that it does contain some. I think some artists understand that more than others.

DM: You're planning on gathering information for this book through interviewing members of the Foundation for Asian-American Independent Media, correct? So my question is, what do you expect from these interviews? What are you hoping to learn from them?

VP: I'm interested in learning how people come to understand themselves as Asian-American. Not necessarily as Vietnamese-American but Asian-American, and what does that mean because that's one of those very complex terms that has a lot of facets. I'm interested in why people go to that organization, why they're involved with it, and why they continue to be involved with it. I'm interested in how this connects with their identity and how they found out about it. I'm also planning on doing a lot of participant observations. I want to observe how organization members interact with each other and other people and what they're talking about and that sort of thing.

DM: Well that's it for my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything important you want to add about your work or what you plan to do?

VP: I think what's really important is that a lot of my work is really helpful to *me* by making me think about current ideas right now. Mainly because I graduated from college, and right when you graduate from college your friend groups disperse almost immediately. I lived in the suburbs and I wanted to perform but I didn't know a lot of people so I stumbled on the Collective and met people with similar senses of humor and met a lot of really cool people that I became involved with and would consider friends even though I don't see them all the time. It just made me feel like I was really part of a community. The Collective definitely had a major impact. I've kind of always gone back and forth thinking it doesn't really exist anymore but on some level it does but it's not organized in a way that it attracts other people.

DM: So do you feel that the Collective answered many of your questions concerning identity or did it raise more questions?

VP: In hindsight it definitely did both because at the time I was straight out of undergrad and I had an idea of what being Asian-American meant, but I met other people who were artists and had been for ten to twelve years already and people who were still starting out and people who had spent a lot of time in the business, and they connected me to people who really made me think about what it means to be an artist. That's also what helped me decide that I didn't want to be an actor, even though it's something I enjoy it's not my life. It was really helpful for me to think through those things, and before I never had that community to mentor me and work with me. It was actually a really short period that I worked at the collective, but it was really helpful creating that base of friends that I now consider colleagues. I would say that even though I only see them a couple times a year, I still feel comfortable and close to them.

DM: Do you have any idea what you might do with your degree once you've finished your schooling?

VP: Most likely I'll end up at a college teaching and researching. If I could end up at DePaul or UIC that'd be great but we'll see how things works out.

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